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ABSTRACT

The dialog method of second-language learning, in which students have many opportunities to hear, read, and use standard English in a relevant and motivating setting, was adapted to general classroom use in elementary and junior high schools in which there was a high percentage of Spanish-speaking students and in which mean reading scores were low. Lessons in many practical skill areas were written into conversational form and were taped, so students could read along as they listened to the intonation contours. Students were paired, and each partner was given only half the dialog. Partners took turns reading the lines while listening to them on the tape recorder and then took turns reading them to each other. Partners then dictated one line at a time, helping each other with spelling and punctuation and correcting errors. Each dialog climaxed in the students performance of the actions described. Although results were disappointing in terms of mean reading scores, almost every child made progress in some area. The slowest students improved in rote mechanical skills; some of the top students showed a dramatic gain in reading scores. The report includes tables of test results for students in fourth grade and in junior high school. (GW)

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DIALOG IN ACTION:

A Multi-Sensory Approach to Language Competency

Reading is part of a total communication act in this adaptation of the dialog method of second language learning to general classroom use. Using varied subject areas, students work as partners in a multi-sensory activity as they listen, speak, read, write and physically respond. Since each partner has only half the message, communication is essential. Data suggests that this division of the dialog is an important factor in increased oral fluency, listening and reading comprehension.

DIALOG IN ACTION:

A Multi-Sensory Approach to Language Competency

INTRODUCTION

Adelina and Gilberto were in their eighth year of school in Tucson, Arizona. Adelina hoped to be a physical education teacher. Gilberto shrugged and said he just wanted a job so he could help his family. Adelina's non-verbal intelligence score was in the eighth stanine, Gilberto's in the ninth. Both had verbal intelligence and reading scores in the third stanine.

By accident we found that a language program designed to help them speak English as their second language was also helpful to native English speakers.

No one who has seen the functional intelligence of such children could take their low verbal IQ scores seriously. Yet Adelina and Gilberto could not express themselves freely in "school English". They could not read their textbooks. Gilberto explained haltingly that by the time he had finished a sentence he had forgotten its beginning.

Many of the students designated as needing special help in English in their school had similar test profiles. These children should have had a wide range of choice as to higher education and careers but would not come close to their potential -- even though many were still willing to try.

The language needs of children like these in Tucson District One schools have been of active concern to administrators and teachers for many years -- back to a time when such concern was downright unfashionable.

BACKGROUND

Our program began at Wakefield Junior High School in 1967, evolving from one started by teachers who were pioneers in adapting English as a second language methods and linguistic insights to the remedial needs of their classes.

In the process of building this language program, I became convinced that there are two easily overlooked aspects of language acquisition: the importance of intonation contours to reading comprehension; and the importance of motor involvement in building language competency.

Another teacher and I developed a two year course around a series of concepts aimed at cognitive and affective as well as language growth. It was based on the premise that those children who do not have an operational control of standard English at the time of admission to school seldom have adequate opportunities to hear and reproduce these speech patterns in the usual classroom setting. Since they can not produce these patterns easily or make automatic transformations, their oral handicap is followed by reading disability.

FORMULATING OBJECTIVES

How could we give such students maximum opportunity to hear and use classroom language? How could we do less talking and the students more? We asked them to keep a record of the number of times they spoke up in all their classes for one week. Many reported that they made only one or two oral responses, sometimes not more than one word.

We watched Gilberto in action outside the classroom. School for him often meant waiting out the hours until time for basketball practice. There he would go over one play almost endlessly, until the exhilarating moment of mind-body flow when the motion finally "felt right" and then became an automatic pattern of action.

Adelina loved modern dance. She would go over and over the separate motions before combining them. Then came more practice until the movements were finally coordinated into a fluid whole.

How could we give our students that kind of drill with English -- hearing, reading, repeating and using structures over and over until they began to sound right to their ears and feel right to their tongues? How to do this without insulting their intelligence or devaluating their personhood?

How to include reading and writing as a bridge between the spoken and written forms so that all the communication skills were experienced as a whole?

How to give each student an immediate chance to use these new language tools of patterns and words in problem-solving discussion?

METHOD: DIALOG AS REMEDIATION

The dialog technique of second language learning occurred to me as a promising vehicle. Students were paired to work with each other to maximize student interaction and literally to take over some of the "teacher" language functions. I re-wrote their lessons into conversational form, including directions, lectures and other teacher talk which takes so much class time. Since the material was relevant to our concepts, students concentrated on ideas as they practiced language.

We taped the lessons so students could read as they listened to the intonation contours. Each was given a complete script, as in the usual foreign language dialog.

Then we asked them to alternate reading the lines with their partners. The embarrassed mumble became more audible with time but clearly reflected our enthusiasm and not their own.

At last it dawned on me -- why should one child try to communicate with another when each partner already had all the information? We then gave each partner only half of the message. For the first time there were significant differences on pre and post tests. Reading scores went up along with language mechanics, reading vocabulary and arithmetic reasoning problems.

Students gave their own evaluations, given here just as they wrote them:

Sergio: "The work we doing help me understand English a lot more better. I don't speak English to good and I whone to speak English a lot more better. I don't want to be a drop out Eather."

Armando: "I have learned words that my uncle uses when he talks and now I know what they mean. This word might be helpful to me one of this days. The dialogs have helped me communicate with other people around me. They have also taught me how to uses words correctly in sentences. These dialogs have made me think more about what I'm writing to. They're easier to with may partner. If I hadn't had my partner beside me I wouldn't have got to my goal."[1]

Sylvia: "From dialogs I have learned how to read, write and spell. These three things I think will help me as long as I live. Working in dialogs has been fun you do not have to worry about nothing you just read write and learn."

Multi-Disciplinary Extension

We extended the method into other disciplines. With the help of the teachers I wrote dialogs in each subject. Students directed each other as they cooked, did science experiments, math problems, shop and art activities. At last -- language in action!

In 1970 by happy accident a physical education instructor at Wakefield was assigned an English class. She decided to use the dialogs even though many of her students were doing quite well in school. To our surprise these top students made the most dramatic gains of all in reading scores, whether their first language was Spanish or English. Native English speakers who were poor readers made significant progress as well.

1. Armando could not write an intelligible sentence at the start of the school year, although his non-verbal intelligence score was in the eighth stanine.

We saw similar results in another English class and later in an elementary class. The evidence strongly supported the statements of Lefevre (1964), Gleason (1965) and other linguists as to the importance of meaningful intonation contours in helping American children write as well as read their own language more efficiently.

The physical education instructor adapted the method to her own classes. She was soon writing her own dialogs as she taught language and reading as part of health and sports. Other teachers in that department used dialogs to teach golf, soccer and other sports skills and rules.

METHOD: DIALOG AS PREVENTION

Since some remedial impact was occurring at junior high level, then the next reasonable step was to plan intervention before the language deficit became so handicapping. In 1972 I introduced the dialog to fourth grade classes in four schools where mean reading stanines were well below the District average. We soon added third and fifth grade classes in the hope of having a continuum, starting with mechanical skill development and progressing to problem-solving interaction.

Doing was the climax of each dialog, whether the subject was learning to use a compass, drawing a softball diamond and converting feet into meters, or learning to use the typewriter as in this third grade dialog (written here in sequence rather than the divided form):

Partner 1: Please show me your index finger, partner.

Partner 2: This is my index finger.

Partner 1: Put the index finger of your left hand on the F key.

Partner 2: I have put my left index finger on the F key, but what about my other fingers?

(Etc.)

Cratty (1972) speaks of the apparently innate differences between the activity levels of infants, with some 150 times more active than others, and passive versus active children differing in marked ways as adults. He finds merit in the idea that some of us are "augmenters" who can sit and "soak up" information, while others are "reducers" who may need a movement channel.

> "Action, when combined with the teaching and learning of communication skills, appears to be highly reinforcing to the participating children, while at the same time requiring their rather total attention and involvement. When researchers and educators begin to structure more carefully and present the techniques they have researched, it is probably that most elementary schools in the world will begin to adopt at least some of the strategies that are beginning to be uncovered."

In writing the dialogs I focused on certain patterns which carried the most stigma in the non-standard dialects, e.g. the double negative. By use of the standard form again and again in all subject areas, we hoped that eventually it would "sound right" -- not as a replacement for their own dialect but as an alternative form.

Whenever possible the dialog presented a problem for the partners to talk over. It might be as simple as "Why should I put <u>two</u> sheets of paper in the platen?" when learning to use the typewriter, or "Why did you ask me to keep that plastic strip <u>under</u> the batteries?" when working with a tape recorder.

The central purpose was to give each child in the class a chance to think through a problem in a safe situation with a friend, with no fear of class ridicule.

Rudy had written what this had meant to him in junior high school:

> "At first I would not talk a lot and I was scare to talk a lot in class but when I had to I would talk than I would be scare to talk loud. I was a shame to miste a lot of words. But I am getting good at it now and not a scare to talk now like I was before. I am going to stude hard."

DIALOG PROCEDURE

Here is a typical fourth grade dialog, with the script shown in sequence rather than divided, for ease of reading:

THE SOFTBALL THROW

Partner 1: We're going to practice the softball throw today, partner.

Partner 2: I'm glad, because I want to learn how to throw the ball more accurately.

Partner 1: Please stand with your feet parallel and a comfortable distance apart.

Partner 2: There! That feels comfortable!

Partner 1: As you move your throwing arm forward, step forward on the opposite foot.

Partner 2: I'm moving my arm and leg at the same time, but what about the follow-through?

Partner 1: Follow through by moving your other foot forward. Now your feet should be farther apart.

Partner 2: Why should my feet be farther apart now?[1]

Partner 1: Your legs are in position so that you can move quickly in any direction.

Partner 2: I wish I could see myself going through these movements.

Partner 1: You can see yourself, in your imagination! Close your eyes, relax, and see yourself throwing that ball right where you want it to go.

Partner 2: It hit the target! That's coordination!

1. The tape recorder is stopped at this point so that each pair of partners can talk about this question. They are usually pleasantly surprised to find that the voice agrees with their answer as they hear the following line.

DIALOG STEPS

1. Children are paired, and soon learn to take boy-girl relationships matter of factly.

2. If they are just learning the technique or if we want to stop the tape for discussion of a problem, they listen first without their papers.

3. Partner 1 reads the first line while listening to it.

4. He reads that line to the partner.

5. They alternate in this way through the dialog.

6. The rehearsal is over. Partner 1 now reads the first line again and then dictates it, helping with spelling and punctuation.

7. Partner 1 takes the other's sentence and reads it carefully, making sure the writer corrects any errors.[1]

8. Partner 2 takes a turn. They alternate in this way until the dialog is finished in half an hour or less.[2]

9. The partners read through the dialog, this time stopping to perform the actions.

Variations are used when the children are thoroughly familiar with the method. They might list the steps for the activity in sequence, write their solution to a problem, etc.

RESULTS:

Research on the elementary program concentrated on the crucial fourth year of school, where test scores so often start to decline. Results were disappointing in terms of mean reading scores although there were some tantalizing clues.

1. During that time the teacher has a chance to check the papers as they are written, so a quick final look and the students are ready for action. When the dialog involves a sports activity, we have seen "slow learners" among the first to solve a problem and turn in error-free papers.

2. The slower student is often more adept than the fast reader in this discipline of proofreading. The immediate feedback quickly cuts down letter inversions and other common spelling errors, as well as helping with "sentence sense." Writing improves quickly too, since the partner demands legibility!

The one class which did show significant reading progress as a whole had many black students. As the junior high study had indicated, hearing, seeing and repeating standard English structures appeared to benefit the speakers of other dialects, and good as well as poor readers.

Although mean gains were discouraging, almost every child made progress in some area. For the slowest, it was in the rote mechanics of spelling and punctuation. For some of the top students, it was a dramatic jump in reading scores.

The correlation of listening skill with reading fluency showed up strongly on a test of hearing and following taped instructions. Those poor readers who made significant gains on this simple listening test made comparable gains in reading skills.

SUMMARY

To the best of my knowledge, this multi-sensory use of dialog to improve language and reading competency through peer interaction is unique to the Tucson District One schools who are using it. The research data is given only as tentative indications inviting further study.

While we hope there are many unexplored applications, the technique has already served these purposes for our students. Each child has:

1. had many opportunities to hear, read and use standard English in a relevant and motivating setting, with no threat to his own way of speaking;
2. had a chance to learn through the modality or combination of modalities most useful to him;
3. experienced success, often for the first time in a language arts or reading class.
4. had many chances to think and talk through problems with a friend, appearing to gain more self-respect and ability to cope with frustration from the experiences;

5. enjoyed the physical release of doing what he has read, heard, written and talked about;
6. found himself listening to and interacting more with peers and less with the teacher.

CONCLUSION

It is my conviction that we need to expend greater and earlier effort to increase listening span and comprehension as vital prerequisites to oral language and reading fluency, and that children are highly motivated to listen carefully when what they hear is relevant to their own total involvement.

May I close with the words of two junior high students who were still working on their dialog while most of their classmates were already outside, reading each other through a soccer play.

Arnold was rushing his partner through the last line when Eddie rebelled: "Hey man -- slow down, will ya? You're goin' too fast!"

"Yeah? Well, you just got to LISTEN faster!"

TABLE I

WAKEFIELD JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

TEST RESULTS OF DIALOG PROGRAM

1969-70

Comprehensive Test of Basic Abilities

Level 3, Form Q

Number 55

Subtest	October, 1969 Mean Stanine	Standard Deviation	Grade Equivalent	May, 1970 Mean Stanine	Standard Deviation	Grade Equivalent
Reading Vocabulary	3.20	1.39	5.1	3.91	1.39	6.5 **
Reading Comprehension	3.38	1.33	4.7	3.84	1.44	5.7 **
Language Mechanics	3.75	1.54	5.4	4.73	1.57	6.8 **
Language Expression	3.51	1.39	4.9	3.73	1.31	5.8 NS
Language Spelling	3.65	1.34	5.5	3.87	1.58	6.0 NS
Arithmetic Computation	3.23	1.48	5.5	4.23	1.78	6.7 **
Arithmetic Concept	3.48	1.45	5.5	4.34	1.50	6.9 **
Arithmetic Application	3.29	1.49	5.3	3.89	1.81	6.3 **

NS -- no significant difference implies normally expected growth for that grade

** -- significant difference beyond the .01 level implying more growth than expected

Mean stanines for October are based on the beginning of grade 7 norms. Those for May are based on the end of grade 7 norms.

Grade equivalents are based on tables provided by the publisher of the test for that stanine. It is given here to facilitate the transfer of the data to a classroom teaching situation.

TABLE II

Subtest	Number	Percent Progressing	Median of Expected Progress	Range of Progress above expected
Read. Voc.	55	75%	.60	.5 -- 4.2
Read. Comp.	55	69%	.56	.5 -- 5.3
Lang. Mech.	55	71%	.60	.3 -- 7.5
Lang. Exp.	55	56%	.58	.5 -- 6.1
Arith. Concpts.	55	80%	.64	.7 -- 4.4

ELEMENTARY DIALOG PROGRAM

TEST RESULTS : 1972 - 1973

TABLE IV

MEAN ACHIEVEMENT SCORES BY CLASS
FOR THE METROPOLITAN READING TEST

FOURTH GRADE

SCHOOL	N	TEST DATE	RAW SCORE	STANDARD SCORE	GRADE EQUIVALENT	CHANGE IN GRADE EQUIVALENT
A	23	Fall '72	32	51	2.50	
	23	Spring '73	47	59	3.30	+.80*
B	12	Fall '72	29	49	2.40	
	12	Spring '73	40	55	2.90	+.50
C	24	Fall '72	30	50	2.45	
	24	Spring '73	40	55	2.90	+.45
D	20	Fall '72	44	57	3.10	
	20	Spring '73	58	63	3.70	+.60
AVERAGE	79	Fall '72	34	52	2.60	
	79	Spring '73	47	59	3.30	+.70*
CONTROL I	22	Fall '72	25	46	2.20	
	22	Spring '73	28	48	2.30	+.10
CONTROL II	24	Fall '72	31	50	2.45	
	24	Spring '73	42	56	3.00	+.55
AVERAGE	46	Fall '72	28	48	2.30	
	46	Spring '73	35	53	2.70	+.40

* Value indicates that objective on reading achievement was gained.

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